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India: A monstrous embryo swelling in the womb of Bharat Mata

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“A strange dusk has descended upon the earth today/ Those whose hearts are devoid of any love and affection, never swayed by any sense of pity/ These are the people who advice us now as to how the world must move./ And those who still feel it’s better to believe in a great cause, orpractice art and strive for attainment... / Their souls are now offered as feasts for vultures and jackals.” (Jeebanananda Das. Translated by the present writer) .

These verses were composed by the Bengali poet Jeebanananda Das, just a few days before his death in 1954. Today, after nearly seventy years, his words reverberate around the present Indian political and social scenario.

As if it is an echo of his fears, an ominous message is blowing in the winds from two recent developments; (i) the results of the legislative assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa, where “those whose hearts are devoid of any love and affection”, have swept the polls; and (ii) the communal riots in different parts of India resulting in killings and destruction of properties, in the course of Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti demonstrations which were led by armed members of Right-wing fanatical Hindu outfits (patronized by the ruling BJP at the Centre), who are “never swayed by any sense of pity.”

The message is clear - India is heading for a political system that can be described as elected oligarchy, shaped by a combination of various factors. First, at the electoral level, there is a tendency among the voters towards residing faith in a single leader who weaves a charisma around himself/herself by appealing to their atavistic aspirations and assuring them of an idyllic future. Narendra Modi perfectly fits this bill. He has succeeded in meeting the aspirations of the majority Hindu electorate by reviving the myth of Ram Rajya and promising them the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra.

Secondly, at the more immediate mundane level, Modi has succeeded in wooing over large sections of the poor by promising them freebies in the shape various socio-economic measures - financial support for farmers, special benefits for women, assistance for Dalits. Whether the announcement of these measures gets translated into their implementation at the ground level is yet to be seen. But their targeted audience in the meanwhile, have been taken in by these promises, and hedged their bets in favour of Modi, as evident from the election results.

Demystifying the results of the Assembly elections

One may wonder why the voters preferred to forget the travails that they had suffered all through the last decade under the same Modi regime - the dislocation of thousands of migrant labourers brought about by Modi’s careless imposition of a sudden lockdown; his implementation of a GST that adversely affected middle and small scale business entrepreneurs and traders. How do we explain

the dichotomy between these bitter experiences of these voters on the one hand, and yet their choice of the same ruling party which was responsible for that plight of theirs on the other hand?

Let us recall the diurnal happenings through which they passed during the last few years. Thousands of their own kith and kin (mainly from Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, who had earlier emigrated to cities for livelihood), were forced out from their urban workplaces by the imposition of a cruel lockdown by the Modi government? In sullen anger, they watched an insensitive chief minister of UP, Yogi Adityanath, presiding over the piling and dumping of the bodies of their near ones who died from Covid, into the Ganges where they floated for days together, being denied a proper funeral. **Yet, they voted for the BJP.**

The Dalits of Hathras in UP, were outraged by the raping and killing of a 19-year old girl from their community by upper-caste Thakur BJP supporters. **Yet, when it came to elections, they voted for a candidate from the same BJP party.** How could the voters of Unnaon in UP prefer a BJP candidate over Asha Sinha, a brave woman who dared to contest against him to give voice to the anger of suppressed women? These voters had been witness to the plight that their neighbour Asha Sinha suffered. Her daughter was raped by local BJP leaders, who then asked her to withdraw the rape charge in exchange of a job, which she refused, and as a result her husband was hauled up on a false charge and killed in police custody.

How do we explain this shameful spectacle of passive subservience by the voters to the very incumbent ruling power which had inflicted sufferings on them? Worse still, how can we explain their electing some of the most notorious BJP candidates who had been accused of raping and murdering their own daughters?

Have these voters descended to the depths of such moral degeneration that make them discard their **izzat'** (self-respect, honour, esteem) and **mandari'** (honesty and uprightness), and drive them to vote for the BJP, just for some immediate material benefits offered by Modi, like free rations and direct cash transfers.?

Seeking explanations

These disturbing questions do not have easy answers. Some blame the UP BJP-government's polling officers for manipulating the EVM machines to extricate votes in favour of the ruling party. The Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav and some journalists have claimed to have detected cases of transferring of EVMs to secret places in suspicious circumstances, and have alleged about polling officers coerced by BJP workers to allow them to control polling booths. Such things could have happened – given the BJP administration's past record of adopting conspiratorial methods with the help of officials and policemen, to manoeuvre the electoral process.

These allegations, one hopes, will be investigated into by the Election Commission (expected to carry out its role as an independent institution), whose findings can explain whether the manipulation of the EVM mode of conducting voting by the ruling BJP played a decisive role in the outcome of the assembly elections.

But the most intriguing problem is – what could have changed the mind set of these people, who appeared to be a disgruntled lot just some time ago, but have now been won over by the BJP? Surveys by independent research organizations agree on a common factor – various social welfare measures initiated by the Modi government, targeting vulnerable sections like poor farmers and women among others, through direct cash transfers and free rations. These measures could have assuaged the ill-feelings that they had earlier nursed against Modi, and incentivised them in favour of the BJP. Coupled with this was the efficiency of BJP's organizational setup, as available from

reports. Long before the elections, its cadres from the RSS, started fraternizing with the voters in neighbourhoods around the the polling booths that they came from, helping them in their daily problems. They thus succeeded in earning their confidence to be able to persuade them to vote for the BJP.

According to some other survey findings, the BJP strategy was a combination of social welfare freebies to woo the poor on the one hand, with a programme of consolidating the Hindu vote bank by stressing on the motif of Hindutva and creating an anti-Muslim paranoia among them on the other. This cocktail was readily gulped down by the voters of UP, and the other three states. It however failed to work in Punjab, where the voters refused to get addicted to the BJP agenda. A more granular analysis of the Punjabi electorate's mindset from the ground level, is yet to be made, to understand its success in stalling the Modi wave at the borders of Punjab.

The Indian electorate's psyche

The exit-polls and the post-poll surveys , often contradictory and misleading, are skin deep. They fail to decipher the far more ominous trends that are shaping the Indian mass psyche and are churning the underbelly of Indian politics today.

At one level, the voters are a cunning lot while choosing their candidates. For all practical purposes, the poor, whether in rural ghettos or urban slums in most parts of India, live under the fiefdom of some local gangster or mafia don, who decides whom he wants to favour and whom to punish.

When these criminals enter the electoral scene and are nominated as candidates by political parties, most of the people in their constituencies vote for these local dons. Some vote in gratitude for benefits that they might have received from him. Some vote out of fear of revenge by the don if they cast their votes against him - since they know that they could be identified, in spite of the secret ballot procedure, thanks to the leakage of voting information from the EVM machines and other sources.

Thus forced to be submissive to these local criminal and corrupt powers, the majority of our voters shelve their moral scruples, and make a virtue of necessity by electing candidates who even face charges of corruption and serious crimes - since they feel that these candidates who wield both financial and muscle power in their respective localities, can be easily approached and supplicated for helping them out at times of problems.

In the recent assembly elections in UP, the BJP nominated these winnable candidates, who quite predictably made their way into the assembly, and also into the cabinet. According to the findings of the Association for Democratic Reforms, in UP some 42% of the voters chose BJP candidates (half of whom have declared criminal cases against them, accused of serious crimes like murder, rape and kidnapping). In continuation of its policy to promote local dons as electoral candidates, the BJP has appointed nearly half of them as ministers in its new cabinet in Uttar Pradesh.

According to some reports, the Muslim minorities in some constituencies in UP were forced to vote for the local BJP candidates, under the threat that if the BJP candidates were defeated, it would be blamed on them, and they would face onslaught from the Hindus. A handful of upwardly mobile Muslim politicians, who had been promised berths by the BJP in its government, and other major institutions in Delhi and other BJP-ruled states, could have persuaded some sections of the Muslim electorate to agree to a transactional deal with the Modi regime, under which they would vote for the BJP candidates, who will in exchange guarantee protection for them at the time of communal riots. Whether the lone BJP Muslim minister, who has been accommodated under such a deal in Yogi

Adityanath's cabinet in UP, will keep his pledge is another matter. To test it, we may have to wait for another communal riot !

This public mood of expediency that prefers powerful criminals in their electoral choice, is not confined to Uttar Pradesh, where the voters have opted for BJP's candidates with criminal records. In the Punjab assembly elections, where the AAP has come to power, the Association for Democratic Reforms found that 52 AAP legislators out of the 117 MLAs, have criminal records including offences like rape, murder and kidnapping. The popular gravitation towards criminals-turned-politicians, dictated by purely selfish needs, thus cuts across all political divides. Whether in Trinamul Congress ruled West Bengal, or CPI(M)-ruled Kerala, or TRS-ruled Telangana, or the-BJP ruled states, it is this new breed of criminal politicians who are ruling over their local constituencies.

The Hindutva twist to nationalism and its appeal to the popular psyche

But behind this nexus between criminal politicians and their voters, there lurks another dangerous popular trend. Beyond the satisfaction of their immediate domestic material needs (met by Modi government's freebies) and their political calculations, the Indian electorate in UP and other states have also been swayed by the propagation of a system of belief codified as the dogma of 'Hindutva' that was propagated by the BJP candidates during the election campaign. Formulated by their mentor, the Sangh Parivar (consisting of various Right-wing Hindu orthodox and militant groups), this ideology is meant to appeal to all Hindus, seeking to cut across caste boundaries, to unify them under one single banner of an India as a Hindu Rashtra. Large sections of the Hindu electorate have put their faith in this messianic vision of a Hindu theocratic Indian nation. They have been imbued with the feeling that if their enemy state Pakistan follows an Islamic theocracy, Indians must also opt for a Hindu theocracy to challenge it – thus changing the terms of dispute between the two states from a secular to a religious level. But this vision of a Hindu Rashtra also has a hostile edge to it. It is an exclusivist one which discriminates against the customs and living styles of the religious minorities. It is especially directed against the Muslim minorities, who are being demonized in this new-fangled framework of Indian nationalism that is being shaped by the BJP. Their religious practices, dressing styles and food habits are being branded as 'anti-national and foreign-imported' (from Pakistan). Their marital choices are also being put under the scanner of the 'big brother' – the presiding Sangh Parivar. If a Muslim man marries a Hindu woman, both having fallen in love and agreeing to their wedding, soon after vigilantes of the Sangh Parivar – Bajrang Dal, Ram Sene, and other similar militant outfits – haul up the Muslim bridegroom and accuse him of 'love-jihad'. This neologism 'love-jihad' has been invented by the Sangh Parivar. It means a war (jihad) in the name of love, implying that the Muslim youth are winning over young Hindu girls through the allurements of love. These militant Right-wing Hindu outfits, patronized and protected by BJP politicians, are acting as extra-state agents of the BJP ruling party, whether at the Centre or the states, in order to translate this warped vision of Indian nationhood into practice. They are weaponizing traditional Hindu religious rituals by giving them an aggressive form. Recently, they chose Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti as occasions to organize processions, and pass through Muslim neighbourhoods raising slogans in front of mosques disrupting prayers. Such demonstrations were clearly acts of deliberate provocation, meant to anger the orthodox sections among Muslims and lead them to retaliate, thus resulting in communal

riots. The Sangh Parivar activists are following a well-planned programme of forcing Muslims and Dalits to reduce themselves to the role of second class citizens under the rule of Hindu majoritarianism. They go on a spree of lynching these minorities, accusing them of following different food habits or dressing styles, and branding them as anti-national. It is this majoritarian hegemonistic call to which, not only the electorate in the Hindi-Hindu heartland of UP and Uttaranchal, but also voters as far away from Goa and Manipur responded with enthusiasm. It is becoming clear, day by day, that the Sangh Parivar's aggressive propaganda of Hindutva – which is made respectable by some who tend to describe it as an ideology – is expanding all over India. **Premonitions of a neo-fascist Hindutva regime** The popular electoral verdict in favour of the BJP in these assembly elections, bears an eerie resemblance to the success that the Nazis achieved in the 1932 elections in Germany. In those elections, the Communists and Social Democrats together gathered some 13 million votes, while the Nazi NSDAP and other right-wing German nationalist parties defeated them by winning about 20 million voters. According to contemporary records, of those who voted for NSDAP, 60-70% came from middle and lower middle class professionals and small traders, and 30%-40% consisted of industrial workers. **This meant that, in terms of political practice, it was not the economic stratification, but the ideological unification that cut across class divisions, which was the decisive factor behind the Nazi victory in elections.** Observing this post-electoral scene, and disturbed by it, a contemporary German philosopher, Wilhelm Reich tried to explore the socio-economic roots of the rise of the Nazis, and their eventual capture of power through elections. Soon after, in 1933, he published a book entitled *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, in which, on the basis of his findings, he concluded that his countrymen were infected with "fascist mass pestilence."

Explaining the popular psyche in Germany of those days, Reich said: "Fascist mentality is the mentality of the subjugated little man, who craves authority and rebels against it at the same time..." Who were these little men in Germany of the 1930s who elected Hitler to power? According to Reich, they were products of a "mechanistic authoritarian civilization... (which) reaps ...fascism," the seeds of which were "sown in the masses of little, suppressed individuals, in the form of mysticism, top sergeant mentality ..." Describing their mood, Reich said: "...the typical structure of the masses... is expressed in their longing for authority, their mysticism and their incapacity for freedom..." Concluding his analysis of the contemporary German psyche, Reich said: "It is the mechanist-mystical character of man in our times which creates fascism, and not vice versa."

In the present circumstances in India, it is necessary to recall some of the warnings that Reich made about the mood of the German masses in his book *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, where he described how the psyche of the German common people was gradually inclining towards fascism. Observing the political inclinations of the Indian electorate today, we often find similarities in the motivations behind their voting behaviour with those of the voters of Germany in 1933. We cannot deny the fact that there is a growing popular support for Narendra Modi and his BJP party. Who are these people who are firming up the base of the BJP? To borrow the phrase 'subjugated little man' from Wilhelm Reich's book, his replicas (both men and women) can be found today among the various segments of the Indian masses – ranging from the poor villagers to the unemployed urban youth, from the disgruntled clerks to dissatisfied professionals. They share the same mood of 'longing for authority' and 'mysticism,' that the

German masses were affected with when they elected Hitler to power.

As for authority', these segments of the Indian people tend to believe that one strong individual, as a supreme authority, can solve their problems. In their perception, Narendra Modi has emerged as a representative of that authority. While his militarist rhetoric against Pakistan bolsters up the patriotic sentiments of these people, his propaganda of promises of social welfare measures lulls them to a sleep-walking journey. They continue to remain tolerant to the point of complicity in the atrocities committed by the killing squads of the ruling party (RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and other goons) against Muslims, Christians and Dalits. Such a popular mood in India today sounds like an echo of the German popular complicity in the killing of Jews in the 1930s. The popular acquiescence in these acts of violence in India is accompanied by the participation of these masses in the tinsel parade of ceremonial functions presided over by a populist demagogue – ceremonies to inaugurate monumental statues and temples that cost crores of rupees spent from the exchequer. Such social trends are signs of a collective cretinism' – the term used by the historian Narayani Gupta to define the popular mood. Don't these demonstrations recall the exhibitionism of the Berlin Olympics, which were presided by another populist demagogue, Adolf Hitler ?

Weighing between hopes and fears

Watching this mass psychology of my people, I keep my fingers crossed over whether the remaining months of the year 2022 will further close our windows, or open them up to fresh winds of change. Let me try to uncoil the present political scenario from a tense knot of two ropes of hopes and fears.

When I turn to the main national parties in the Opposition camp, the Congress and the Left, I think that they are not likely to regain their all-India foothold, given the utter disorder in the former, and the fading away of the latter. Rahul Gandhi's record of leadership – dismal by all standards – does not hold any promise of reversing the trend of internal strife, that has been plaguing the Congress party's provincial units. Even the Congress governments in the few states where it is in power (Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan), are bedevilled by rivalries among its ministers. In the coming months, we may see more leaders like the war horse Amrinder Singh, deserting the sinking ship of the GOP (Grand Old Party), and joining the central ruling party BJP, or some regional party out of their purely selfish interests and political calculations, totally devoid of any ideological commitment. One wonders what made Amrinder Singh stick to the Congress all these years. Was it any belief in the Congress party's ideology of secularism and democracy, or was it sheer opportunism to seek the shelter of the then ruling Congress at the Centre, in order to protect his fiefdom which he inherited from his royal ancestors ?

Congress as a tragi-comic actor

Indian leaders are fond of consulting astrologers to find out which parties can ensure them a profitable political future. They also visit temples to seek blessings to ensure their electoral victories. Rahul Gandhi, after a round of such temple trips found out to his dismay that they did not yield any satisfactory results, what with the humiliating defeats of his party in state elections. Rahul then shifted his obeisance to another sooth-sayer – Prashant Kishor, a professional expert in commercial market advertising who has entered the new business of electoral politics, framing USP for his clients. Kishor had earlier offered his services to a variety of political parties ranging from the BJP to regional parties to formulate their respective electoral strategies. Devoid of any ideological commitment, he has always been ready to sell his expertise to the highest bidder.

When Rahul Gandhi approached him, he readily agreed. But apparently, things went wrong when Prashant dictated his terms to re-organize the Congress party, which were resented to by Rahul and his cohorts. Following this disastrous Rahul-Prashant misalliance, there is a joke doing the rounds: "The Congress was founded in 1888, and is dumbfounded in 2022."

The decline of the Left

As for the Left parties, they have been reduced to non-entities in national politics - thanks to the the arrogant policies and practices followed by their leading partner, the CPI(M). The Left's decline started with the CPI(M)-led West Bengal government's decision in the early 2000s to seize land from unwilling farmers in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh. and lend that land to corporate houses (like Selim of Indonesia and the Tatas) to set up their industries. It led to demonstrations of protests by the farmers, which were ruthlessly suppressed by the Left government's police force and the CPI(M)'s hoodlum cadres. Popular resentment against such acts of the party was not only confined to West Bengal, where the voters kicked out the CPI(M) at the 2011 assembly elections, but also extended to other parts of India, where its followers felt repelled by the behaviour of its leadership, and they gradually withdrew support - as evident from its defeat in Tripura.

After losing West Bengal and Tripura, the CPI(M) now runs only one state government in Kerala, where again its Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan is grappling with dissent by factions within his party, as well as wide spread allegations of corruption and nepotism. His latest ambitious plan to introduce the semi-high speed Silver Line railway project has aroused opposition from the local villagers who would be forced to give up their lands to make way for the railway line, and are not satisfied with the financial compensation being promised by him. They are being supported by a wide spectrum of social activists, and environmentalists who warn about the hazards that could happen to the surroundings if Pinarayi Vijayan implements his pet railway project.

The Kerala Chief Minister's rhetoric of stubborn defence of his project, resembles the speeches of Narendra Modi when he blusteringly defends his Gujarat-based bullet train project. But more importantly, if Vijayan persists in his Silverline project, he may end up like his Bengali CPI(M) comrade Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who lost his chief ministership due to a similar self-righteous ambition - in his case, that of setting up industries by seizing lands of farmers. Because of this growing alienation from the public over the years, the Left is fast losing its leverage in decision-making in national politics. I fear that the Left will soon be reduced from non-entity to invisibility.

Political vacuum

In the absence of an enlightened leadership from either a confused Congress party, or a declining Left, there is thus an empty space left in the Indian political scenario. As it is often said, nature abhors vacuum. So, the vacuum is fast being filled up by different political forces. The BJP-led supremacist Hindutva forces have occupied a large part of that vacuum. The rest of the vacuum is being filled up by discontented elements from different segments of society and regions, represented by their respective political leaders - Arvind Kejriwal of AAP from Delhi, Mamata Banerjee of Trinamul Congress from Bengal, Stalin of DMK from Tamilnadu, T. Chandrashekhara Rao of the TRS from Telangana, and Uddhav Thackeray leading a coalition in Maharashtra, who are running governments in their own states.

These regional ruling parties have been successful in maintaining their hold on their people by combining social welfare measures for them at the local level on the one hand, with a strident self-assertion of their regional identities against the BJP-ruled central government's attempts at curbing their powers on the other. This has ensured them popularity among their electoral constituencies, and return to power every five years.

Recent confabulations among some of the leaders of these regional ruling parties (T. Chandrasekhar Rao, Mamata Banerjee, and Uddhav Thackeray among others) have led to the speculation that they may provide an alternative to the ruling BJP, if they come together on a common national platform. They are thus expected to replace the traditional national parties – the fast sinking boat of the Indian National Congress and the discredited Left.

The flipside of regional populist politics

But it may be difficult for this new generation of regional leaders to unite on a national strategy to counter and oust the BJP from power. They may be politically canny and cunning in running their state governments in their respective regions, but they are totally devoid of any broad ideological belief on a national level – unlike their political predecessors who were committed to some ideology or other, whether Gandhian, Lohiaite Socialism, or Communism. Even their present opponent party, the BJP, is wedded to an ideology that is theocratic (however hateful and obnoxious it might be) that aims at unifying Indians under the umbrella of a strident Hindu nationalism, and succeeds in inspiring and recruiting young people around that ideology.

One may argue that the Indian masses do not give a damn about these high-falutin ideologies, and are primarily concerned about *roti, kapra, ghar,* and whichever politician – even if he is a goon – promises that, they will vote for him. Sadly enough, we have to accept this reality, judging by the increasing number of criminals who are being elected by our people as MLAs and MPs every five years. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, at least 43% of MPs in the present parliament face criminal charges. Apparently, for the political parties, winnability of their candidates – by whatever means that they may adopt – is more important than any moral code. They resort to a three-pronged strategy: (i) buying voters with instant freebies (like cash doles); (ii) wooing voters with promises of future sops; and (iii) coercion of voters to elect them by employing their muscle power. It is in accordance with these prevailing norms of electoral politics in India, that the regional political parties have come to power in their states. These parties are essentially personality-based – led by individuals who have built up a charisma around themselves through their populist slogans and social welfare measures – like Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, or T. Chandrasekhar Rao in Telangana Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi. These politicians are extremely ego-centric in their policies and practices, and totally devoid of any ideological commitment to principles of democracy and secularism. Let us take a few examples. The record of the TMC chief minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee is a classic illustration of the politics of combining populist measures (like distributing cycles to village girls) to assuage the poor on the one hand, with the suppression of any opposition to her authoritarian policies on the other. Her intolerance of dissent reached a ridiculous depth, when she ordered her police to arrest a professor of the prestigious Jadavpur University in Kolkata, just because he had circulated a cartoon ridiculing her. The TMC's credibility as a secular party has also come under a cloud recently, with reports of its leaders and members joining Ram Navami processions organized by Right-wing Hindu groups in Bengal. In Barrackpur in South 24 Parganas district, TMC workers joined the extremist fanatical Hindu outfit Vishva Hindu Parishad in organizing such rallies. At another spot, Bhatpara, a Trinamul Congress MLA, Shomnath Shyam mobilized around 100 youths armed with swords and daggers, who were seen dancing and chanting *Jai Shri Ram,*

to celebrate Mahavir Jayanti. (Re: *The Telegraph* . April 11, 2022)

It is these local gangsters whom Mamata Banerjee had been using to coerce voters and defeat her political rivals, who are now posing a threat to her administration. In a village in Birbhum recently, inter-gang rivalry among these Trinamul Congress members led to the killing of a family which had been a part of that party. A red-faced Mamata Banerjee had to concede to a High Court order for a CBI inquiry into the incident, since the police force run under her administration was not found trustworthy.

Let us turn our attention to another ruling regional party - the TRS in Telangana. Its chief minister, T. Chandrasekhar Rao is no less intolerant of the rights of his political opponents. There are daily reports of house arrests of Congress leaders and activists who want to demonstrate against his misrule. He presides over a fiefdom consisting of his family members who are ministers in his cabinet, and runs an administration riddled with corruption. Yet he manages to keep his people satisfied with freebies like cash doles for farmers and concessions for women.

At the national level, we notice changing power equations between Chandrasekhar Rao and Narendra Modi, during the last few years. Earlier, Rao's TRS MPs supported some of Modi's bills on the floors of Parliament, while his party cadres in Telangana fought the ranks of the local BJP - which gave rise to the joke: {Dilli me dosti, galli me kusti}'. (Friendship in Delhi, and wrestling in the interiors). Of late, Chandrasekhar Rao appears to be moving to a more confrontationist stance against the Modi government, as evident from his meeting with the CPI(M) and CPI leaders in Hyderabad, and his ambition to emerge as a national leader in the upcoming electoral campaign for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. The AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal, despite his anti-Centre rhetoric, continues to betray a soft corner for the Hindutva propagandists. Recently, during the disturbances in Jehangirpuri in Delhi, his party blamed them on Rohingya and Bangladeshi illegal immigrants' - echoing the BJP leaders who raise these same bogies to justify their anti-Muslim rampage there.

In Maharashtra, the coalition government of the regional Shiv Sena and NCP and Congress stands on a feeble basis. The latter, being wedded to secular politics, are uncomfortable with the Sena's strident claim to the heritage of the real Hindutva' (as defined by its founder Bal Thackeray), in its battle with the other claimant to Hindutva - the BJP. Given this scenario, it is yet to be seen whether these regional parties which are running state governments can come together and build up a united front to be able to oust the BJP from power in 2024. {{De-ideologization of Indian politics}} The rise of these regional parties and their leaders is a sign of the de-ideologization of Indian politics. This new generation of regional leaders are totally devoid of any commitment to a larger ideology - whether socialism or Gandhism. They are only devoted to their regional interests and personal ambitions - shifting their loyalty from one ruling party to another at the Centre. It may be relevant in this connection to recall the ethics and ideological commitment that ruled political practice by parliamentary parties during the three decades following Independence. Despite their differences on economic policies, both the ruling Congress party and its opponents, whether from the Left CPI or the Rightist Swatantra Party, shared a common space of secular and democratic discourse, and followed the norms of that discourse. This space in national politics, was presided over by the Congress Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (who is now being demonized every day by our present Prime Minister). Nehru, both on the floors of Parliament, and outside, engaged in friendly dialogues and debates

with Opposition party leaders like S. A. Dange and A.K. Gopalan from the Communist fold, Socialist leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia, and the Right wing Swatantra Party's patriarch, the ex-Congressman C. Rajagopalachari. All through the three decades following India's Independence, both the ruling Congress and the Opposition parties used to engage in important debates over issues like their respective ideological beliefs and models of economic planning. During this period, there was a sort of co-existence of these different political viewpoints in the national scenario. There was a disruption in this continuum in 1975, when ironically enough, it was Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi, who sabotaged her father's tolerant attitude towards dissenting views, by imposing the Emergency. But that hateful interregnum was soon overcome by the 1977 elections that restored the old tradition of preserving the co-existence and debates among political groups. {{Changed scenario of the 1990s}} The political scenario dramatically changed in the 1990s when the BJP transformed the language of political discourse from civilized debates to violent confrontation. It began with the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani's 'Ratha Yatra,' that left in its trail thousands of Muslim victims, killed by his followers. It ultimately ended up with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, that provoked the most devastating communal riots in 1992 - comparable only to the pre-Partition riots.

Ever since then, the space of secular and democratic politics has shrunk, and has been eroded by the saffron brigade, patronized by the ruling BJP, which has replaced that space with the new politics of Hindu majoritarianism.

Voices of hope?

Yet, in this bleak scenario, we hear voices of protest which are coming up from the soil. The farmers' protest movement, cutting across religious and caste lines, forced Modi to withdraw the infamous farm laws. His much-vaunted 56-inch chest shrunk into its actual size of 36-inch - or may be even less - when the balloon within which he enclosed it, burst in November 2021. The anti-CAA demonstration in Shaheenbag in Delhi, which was run mainly by women, led to the shelving of the implementation of CAA rules - at least for sometime.

During the next two years, such aggrieved people from other sections in different regions, who have been suffering under the Modi regime, may break out in sporadic and spontaneous demonstrations of protest. If their local leaders can mobilize them under a united banner to resist the oppressive policies and acts of the Modi government (as the farmer leaders did to defeat Modi's laws), they can change the mass psychology and persuade the voters to overthrow it in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Only this ground swell of popular movements can abort the birth of the monster that is kicking within the womb of Bharat Mata.

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